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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 000049

SIPDIS

BAGHDAD FOR AMBASSADOR ERELI

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SUBJECT: WEBSITES BLOCKED AS NEW MINISTER ASSERTS AUTHORITY

REF: 08 MANAMA 430

Classified By: CDA Christopher Henzel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: The government blocked a number of political and commercial websites under an order from the new Minister of Culture and Information. Political societies and human rights activists criticized the move. End Summary.

**¶2.** (SBU) On January 14, newly-appointed Minister of Culture and Information Sheikha Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa issued her first ministerial order, instructing all telecommunications companies and internet service providers in Bahrain to block a number of websites. Sheikha Mai said the sites "violate the press and publication law, transgress local values, and impair national unity." Within hours a number of political, human rights, and commercial websites were blocked. Affected sites included:

--Muntadayat Al-Ayam,  
--Muntadayat Al-Sareh Al-Watani,  
--Shuhada' Al-Bahrain (Al-Awal Electronic Journal),  
--Muntadayat Al-Malikiyah,  
--Muntadayat Al-Daih,  
--Harakat Al-Haq, and  
--Wa'ad Political Society.

(Note: Google's translation site was also blocked along with a number of sites deemed by the ministry to be pornographic. The order also blocked proxy servers and many of the sites providing information on proxies, which many Bahrainis used to circumvent internet censorship.) Reinforcing the message, Bahrain's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority issued a statement on January 24 in which it threatened to revoke the license of any operator found in violation of Sheikha Mai's order.

**¶3.** (SBU) The (Shia) Wifaq party, the largest in Bahrain's parliament, denounced Shaikha Mai's move, stating that blocking websites would harm Bahrain's image more than any comments that might be posted on them. The chairman of the secular Wa'ad party (which has no seats in lower house) decried the Minister's "misuse of authority." Representatives of the Bahrain Human Rights Society, the unlicensed Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and Reporters Without Borders condemned the order as a retreat on freedom of expression and information.

**¶4.** (C) According to Al-Wasat Editor-in-Chief Mansoor Al Jamri, more than 60 web sites have been blocked. Aside from one token leftist Sunni web page (Muntadayt Al-Sareh Al-Watani), the remainder are the most popular sites read by Bahrain's Shia community. Al Jamri told PAO on January 25 that he believed the crackdown was part of a gradual strategy by the GOB to silence the Shia population. He contended that Information Ministry U/S Hamad Al Mannai was the driving force behind the web site ban, rather than Sheikha Mai, who

seems to be focusing on cultural matters and deferring to others on media controversies.

¶5. (C) Comment: For the moment, the GOB seems serious about cutting off access to the affected websites. However, it appeared to lose interest in a similar campaign in June 2008 (reftel) and may do so again. We expect word of new proxy sites to spread; the computer-literate will circumvent the current controls. The GOB response, either blocking those new proxies or ignoring them, will give some indication about its commitment to cracking down on internet freedoms. Regardless, oppositionists have lambasted the recent move as an attempt to restrict Shia criticism of the regime.

¶6. (C) Comment continued: It is also interesting that Sheikha Mai's first official act as minister would be to block websites. She built her reputation on cultural preservation and has heretofore shown little interest in the information side of the ministry. Indeed, she broke with tradition by locating her office within the cultural branch of the ministry. Given Sheikha Mai's personal focus and apparent disinterest in the information side of her portfolio, Al Jamri may be correct in his assessment that U/S Al Mannai is asserting himself.

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